

First Sunday in Lent – 2023

Genesis 3:1-21

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

One of the most difficult things for a Christian is to know that God will not remove your cross. God does indeed leave some afflictions in place. It is beautifully oxymoronic: “My power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). St. Paul was given an affliction. He called it a “thorn in the flesh.” He wasn’t too happy about it. Paul knew why it was given to him. It was to keep him from becoming conceited. Do you know any conceited people? The Lord saw fit to burden Paul with this unknown malady. St. Paul called it a “messenger of Satan” and that this thorn in the flesh “harassed him.” Are there unpleasant things in your life that you have asked God to remove? I had two brothers die of muscular dystrophy. The first was a national poster child, posing with Roy Rogers on occasion. Ronald Nathan died before I was born. The other brother, John Byron, asked the haunting question of my mother: “Why me? Why this?” What would you say in reply?

John would pray for another year of life. He held out that a cure was surely close and that God would eventually deliver him from his affliction. Listen to St. Paul’s words: “Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:8-10). One affliction that we all bear is temptation. Each of you has known failure. How easy is it to feel like a loser when temptation grips your mind, your heart and you fall? James wrote this: “Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:14-15). Have you prayed that temptation be removed from you and the reply is, “My grace is sufficient for you?” Have you failed in the face of temptation, over and over, and asked God, “Why me? Why this?”

Immediately after He was baptized Jesus was driven into the desert by the Spirit. Jesus’ baptism is the beginning of His public ministry. At the Jordan, Jesus is anointed as the Christ and He takes up the mantle of the Messianic King. What does that mean? One of the things it means is confronting Satan. “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). Temptation; since the Garden of Eden part of being human is coping with temptation. The devil is a liar. He lies. He is the father of lies and a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44). Temptation is a lie. Temptation is the lie that evil blesses us. Temptation is the lie that defying God makes us strong. Temptation is the lie that self is worth serving and satisfaction is found there, in self-gratification. Satan lies to you and tells you that you cannot help but capitulate to your sinful desires. The truth is that we willingly ally ourselves to the lie and then, at some point, we know that we failed and we feel like losers. “Why me? Why this?”

Satan must have heard the Father’s voice at Jesus’ baptism. Satan is familiar with the sound of God’s voice. The devil knew the timbre of God’s prophetic voice, its veracity, and its weight.

When our first parents sinned in the Garden, the devil was cursed by the Almighty. Perhaps above all of God's Words, these left the deepest mark in Satan's dark spirit: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall crush your head, and you shall strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15). The "Seed of the Woman" was Satan's mortal enemy, his conqueror, and his doom. God was sending a Champion who would disarm Satan and dismantle his kingdom and usher in His own. Satan heard the Father at Jesus' baptism: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 4:17).

Adam too was God's son (Luke 3:38). He proved himself feeble under the devil's tempting craft. Eat; serve yourself; become like God; it was effective. Now the devil would goad the new, greater Adam with similar drivel. "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread" (Matthew 4:3). The Lord Christ was hungry. True man, he needed food to live. Bread; it would have been pure relief. His body must have been screaming for it. Prove who you are! Turn rock into bread and show me that you are the Son of God! It is an appeal to pride, an appeal to regal autonomy, an appeal to acquiesce to natural need. Would Jesus succumb to any of that? He stood there for you, in that desert, under that assault. He met our enemy for all of us. Falter in the slightest way and the whole plan of redemption crumbles. And so He answered: "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:4).

That is a victory of the highest order. Temptation is met and vanquished. Twice more, with sinister barbs embedded in the foulest of words, Satan unleashes his twisted deceptions. What is Jesus armed with? Christ is armed with truth, armed with God's Word, armed with a radical fidelity that has no weakness. "It is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test'" (Matthew 4:7). "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve'" (Matthew 4:10). The Word is living and active. The Word made flesh, after forty days of fasting, was living and active, triumphing in the desert for you. That victory is never going away. That victory is yours. He gives it to you. The Scripture says that the devil left Him until an opportune time (Luke 4:13). What time was that? As Jesus is arrested, as those who hated Him and twisted His words came to take the Son of God captive and drag Him to Golgotha, the Lord alluded to Satan's presence: "This is your hour, and the power of darkness" (Luke 22:53).

Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God. Save yourself, if you are the Christ. Satan was verbal as the Lord hung, pierced, bleeding. God's power is made perfect in weakness. There it is – perfect power. Christ suffering the incalculable shame of bearing our sin. He is saturated with it. All of our sin is on Him and Satan mocks Him mercilessly. Do you see it? God loving you, dying for you, serving you, blessing you, triumphing over all your enemies for you – in weakness He is unleashing His power, His kingdom, His love, His dominion, His grace. Do you see it? Father, forgive them. His body was screaming it. Satan has no answer. Your failure does not change this victory. Do you see it? Christ's cross stands above your failure. Your failure will fade away. Christ's cross will never fade away; humanly speaking, it grows with every generation; it grows with the vast number of souls that are being saved. Do you see it?

Jesus saw it before it happened. He told all who were listening: "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth,

will draw all people to myself" (John 8:31-32). Lifted up, high and exalted on the holy cross, Christ drew you to Himself. Do you see it? The devil, whom Paul calls the "god of this age," he blinds the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:4). They disregard the beautiful truth that power is made perfect in weakness; but we see it. God has opened the eyes of our hearts to see that Christ crucified is perfect power. We won't carry our afflictions forever. He has won for us a heavenly domain, a heavenly body, a life beyond this broken world and our broken flesh. The faith that He breathes into us rejoices in our trials, our weaknesses. The Lord Christ is risen. We are God's beloved people. We pick up our crosses, whatever they may be, and we follow Him. My brother John died at 15. He knew that He was in God's hands. He knew that muscular dystrophy was not forever. The reign of Christ and His heaven are forever. The day he died, lame John leaped like a calf from the stall (Malachi 4:2). Christ's weakness was made perfect in him. Christ's weakness is perfect in you.